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**THE ONE HUNDRED**  
*And*  
**TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY**  
*Of The*  
**ARMENIAN EVANGELICAL**  
**MOVEMENT**  
**1846 – 1971**

Published by  
The Armenian Evangelical Union  
of  
North America

October, 1971

Contribution: 50 cents

Theology Library  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY  
AT CLAREMONT  
California

## P R E F A C E

*This brochure on the 125th Anniversary of the Armenian Evangelical Movement was authorized by the Executive Committee of the Armenian Evangelical Union of America, Inc. (Eastern States and Canada) for use by all of the churches forming the Armenian Evangelical Union of North America at their convention in Detroit, Michigan, October 7-10, 1971.*

*It was prepared by two of our distinguished Armenian Protestant clergymen, the Rev. S. K. Sulahian and the Rev. Dr. Giragos H. Chopourian. Rev. Sulahian is Pastor of the Armenian Evangelical Church of New York and is Chairman of the Commission on Ecumenicity of the Armenian Evangelical Churches. Dr. Chopourian is Executive Secretary of the Armenian Missionary Association of America, Inc., which is the missionary agency of the Armenian Evangelical Churches of North America.*

*We are indeed grateful to these two gentlemen and scholars for their contribution of experience and thought. We trust that a reading of this brochure will provide not only a historical perspective but inspiration for our times.*

*Vartan Hartunian, Moderator  
Armenian Evangelical Union of America, Inc.  
(Eastern States and Canada)*

## **AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE BEGINNINGS OF THE ARMENIAN EVANGELICAL MOVEMENT**

The first permanent mission station for Armenians was founded by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions on June 9, 1831 with the arrival of the Reverend William Goodell to Constantinople. The stated intention of the American Board was the introduction of "the New Testament in the spoken tongue of the people and to assist them in working out reforms in their old Church and under their own leaders."<sup>1</sup> However, despite this honest intention, and notwithstanding the warm welcome given to the American missionaries by the spiritual leaders of the Apostolic Church at first, the separation came within a short period of sixteen years on July 1, 1846.

Reforms, like revolutions, do not come about accidentally nor do they occur in a vacuum. Such events take place when tensions, grievances, intellectual awakening, economic developments and a spirit for progress have a chance to combine in sufficient strength. An investigation into the beginnings and the final establishment of an Armenian Evangelical Movement reveals that such factors as those that bring on revolutions had combined in sufficient strength to give birth to a new historical event. When this broad outlook is made operative in research, the student writes objectively because he not only sees the facts but also sympathizes with all the different points of view represented by the parties. For, numerous groups played heated roles in the event of the founding of the Armenian Evangelical Movement and each group had, in its estimation, valid reasons for its stand.

Therefore, an analytical as well as critical study of that event may not only demonstrate that the separa-

tion was inevitable but may help remove much of the misunderstanding that exists between the two traditions and provide valuable insights for a fuller cooperation between them. An honest understanding of the tensions and mistakes, as well as the possibilities, may provide researchers and ecumenists avenues of rapprochement for a more effective ministry to all Armenians, and, hopefully to people all over the world among whom Armenians live.

### **The Role of the Missionaries**

The objective of the American Board was "to devise, adopt, and prosecute the gospel among those who are destitute of the knowledge of Christianity."<sup>2</sup> To fulfill this laudable purpose, the personnel in the field used education and the press as means of preaching the gospel and distributing the productions of the press. The missionary, the teacher-missionary, the medical-missionary used their skills as a means to give the Gospel. Education was used as the method to evangelize - to inculcate "the fundamental truths of the Gospel." But, this approach was problematic. It is difficult to indoctrinate and not proselytize. Therefore, the premise of the Missionary that he could give evangelical truths without challenge from the Armenian Church was both shaky and contradictory.

Further, the ancestors of the missionaries having struggled for church reform in England and having given it up as impossible, had finally emigrated to New England. They had come out of a tradition of anti-episcopacy, anti-ceremonialism, and independency. In the U.S. their Congregationalism had been modified through two hundred years of theological discussion. To the missionaries, "Romish" ways were an abomination, the Bible was the final and supreme authority, the Sacraments were symbols, and the Church was the fellowship of the gathered people. With both traditions operative

in his life, the American missionary became highly critical of the Apostolic Church. Unable to comprehend (and if able, unable to sympathize) in psychological and sociological depth the historic symphonic relationship of the Church and Nation, the missionaries engaged, from the very beginning, in negative criticisms of the Armenian Church. They found the liturgies of the Church strongly tainted with error, the forms of worship "a mummery and an abomination," fasting and the cross the most prominent of the superstitions, and the entire tone of the church "more objectionable in every feature than any papal mass."<sup>3</sup> Gradually, as the attitudes, activities, and methods of the missionaries were seen as a threat to the Armenian Church, opposition developed. The conflict and separation were inevitable. Those of us, who are living in this juncture of history, can understand why it was so. There was a strong missionary outreach in the affluent Christian world of Europe and America of early nineteenth century. Missionaries went about their work with zeal. The zeal demonstrated by the American missionaries among Armenians was viewed as a threat to the Armenian Church. The Armenian Church was frightened by missionary activities such as the establishment of a Protestant ministry of public worship for Armenians, the founding of the Union of the Pious, the employment of defrocked Armenian higher clergy for the translation of the Scriptures, and the employment of the 'converted' priests and laymen in their work. It considered these to be divisive activities. The Armenian Church saw the intent and activity of the missionary as an imposition, and found him to be unsympathetic to the Church.

**The Cup was full.** The missionary had a great contribution to make, of course. He was full of love of God and man. His contribution had it been accepted wholly, would have restructured not only the life of the Armenian Church and its people but the inner life of Turkey as well! Unfortunately, the Armenian Church was neither ready nor willing to accept it.

## **The Role of the Reformed**

The American missionaries came with an effective strategy. This consisted in the translation and distribution of the Scriptures, and the provision of tracts and books of the reform tradition. Such missionary endeavors were actually world-wide in the nineteenth century—not just a phenomenon among the Armenians. The mission to the Armenians was just a small portion of missions propagated by the Americans, the English, the Germans and others. In the case of the Armenians, higher clergy who had renounced their celibate vows were engaged in translating spiritual literature from English into Armenian and Turkish-Armenian. The sale and distribution of these brought many to the saving knowledge of Christ. Krikor Peshtimaljian, a biblical and literary scholar, propagated the concept of religious revitalization. Hovhannes Der Sahakian and Senekerim Der Minassian were converted to an evangelical view. Soon, their ranks were augmented by reformists like Der Kevork, Sarkis Varjabed, Apissoghom Eutudjian (who became the first pastor of the first Armenian Evangelical Church in Constantinople). In nearby Nicomedia, two priests—Vertanes Yeznakian and Haroutune Baghdassarian—were converted on reading a tract by Legh Richmond entitled “The Dairyman’s Daughter.” According to some estimates by 1838 there were between 500 to 800 evangelicals in Constantinople and surroundings.

As conviction was strengthened, the newly “awakened” developed a radical protest against the Armenian Church. They found the theology and ceremonies of the Armenian Church unacceptable on the ground that instead of being based on the teachings of the Bible, they were founded on “human inventions,” and not on the inspiration of the Scriptures. They developed disrespect to the forms and rites of the Church, though not against the Armenian Church, insisting that the old venerable Church had lost its original New Testament “simplicity” and “purity” and that it should return to

that "pure" evangelical form. They conceived salvation to be by faith alone; that the Visible Church can and does err; that church and priest craft cannot give salvation; that the Holy Communion is a visible symbol of the death of Christ; that the veneration of relics, crosses, and pictures, and the practice of praying for the dead, are all contrary to Scriptures; that Christ is the sole Mediator and Atonement for Sin; and that the Scriptures are the revelation of God's will to man and the sufficient rule of faith and conduct.

Thus convinced, they became extremely critical of church and clergy. They cast taunts at the clergy, as illustrated by the caustic reply of a mother to the priest who had come to caution the family of the dangers of following the American teachings:

Now I wish to ask you one question. Do you suppose that when our Savior first instituted the Lord's supper, he wore those splendid robes, and that mitre set with diamonds, and carried such a golden staff as our bishops do at mass?

Thus, the converted became vocal against the biblical ignorance of the priests and turned themselves into effective self-proclaimed "evangelists" or "missionaries." When as a result of such radical stands, the Armenian Church applied pressure and restrictions, the converts' afflictions deepened their convictions, flagged their zeal, and made them more steadfast in their faith. One convert, who had been a colporter and had lost his vineyards and mulberry orchards and had endured violence said of his sufferings:

The truth in my heart was like a stake slightly driven into soft ground, easily swayed, and in danger of falling before the wind; but by the sledgehammer of persecution God drove it in till it became immovable.<sup>4</sup>

Strangely, strictness and persecution had the salutary effect of giving the "regenerated" determination to suffer for their beliefs. When Der Haroutune Baghdassarian's



hair and sacerdotal beard were sheared and he was cast out of the church with kicks and blows, with the mob calling after him "Accursed," he testified thus in the prison into which he had been placed:

I entered the prison with a joyful heart, committing myself to God, and giving glory to him that he had enabled me to pass through fire and sword. . . . And now I am dead to my former character and position. I obtained a new life in Christ.

William Goodell immortalized the steadfastness of the converted under tribulation in the following words:

Their songs of praise from the whole congregation went up like the sound of many waters, and reminded me of the singing of the ancient Bohemian brethren amidst the raging fires of persecution. And, indeed, to see them stand . . . . with such firmness on the Rock of eternal ages . . . . to see them take joyfully the spoiling of their goods . . . . was a spectacle for angels and for men.

All in all, persecution served as an advantage to the Armenian Evangelicals: it stimulated choice brave young men, whose influence became important later on, to join the American Seminary; it excited extensive attention among the villagers who wanted to know what "Protestantism" was; it caused the spread of evangelicalism; it turned the convictions of the persecuted more pronounced; it gave the American missionaries "justification" to plan and act more independently from the Armenian Church.

**The cup was fuller.**

### **The Role of the Armenian Church**

After the conversion of the state of Armenia to Christianity, the newly-established Church entered into

the main stream of Orthodox Christianity and was represented at the first three of the great Ecumenical Councils. Unable to accept the decision on Christology of the fourth—Council of Chalcedon—it finally rejected the decision at the Synod of Dowin in 506 or 508 A.D. This was of crucial importance in the history of the Armenian Church—a turning point—because it determined not only its doctrinal position within the entire Christian world but also affected immensely the political life of the Armenian people, the character and orientation of theological literature, and the temper of the religious leadership. The decision led, according to Bishop Sarkissian, to disastrous consequences of isolation resulting “in hard, staunch, exclusive, unyielding attitudes.” The isolation, coupled with other historical and political factors, nationalized the Church bringing about symphonic relationship between the Armenian Church and the Armenian Nation. The Armenian Church had kept the nation together through centuries of oppression and upheaval; it had supported wars of independence; it had kept language and folklore; it had furnished martyrs. It could not therefore tolerate anything that would impair national consciousness and unity for “Christian” meant Armenian and “Armenian” meant Christian.

Now, when the Armenian Church leadership was convinced that this church-nation symphonic relationship was under threat as a result of the activities of the American missionaries, they reacted strongly and with the support of the lay leadership in the Church developed a strategy to obstruct the growth of the Movement. The conviction grew out of such observations as the following: the Armenian Church was criticised; the activities of the missionaries revealed tendencies that could divide; the Armenian Evangelical Movement had made “considerable headway,” the religious and theological intention of the American missionaries had become clearer.

Alarmed at the headway the American Mission had made among Armenians, doubtful of the theological posi-

tion of the missionaries, and fearful that the Protestant incursion would destroy the bond of union between Church and Nation—the only unifying element of the nation—the combined lay and religious leadership reacted negatively, and on March 3, 1838, began its first round of persecution by putting all missionary publications under the ban by a patriarchal bull. On February 7, 1839, a priest and a teacher were arrested and sent to the monastery of St. Garabed in Caesaria and on March 13, 1839 four more leaders were arrested and exiled. On April 28, 1839, all communication with the missionaries was prohibited by a new patriarchal bull. In the meantime, about five hundred others, including bishops, priests, and bankers were called up to the Patriarchate and examined with regards to their religious views. The missionaries themselves were accused before the Turkish Government (with a view to having them banished) as having made proselytes from the Armenians—an offence against the Sublime Porte.

But, with the routing of the 80,000 strong Turkish Army by Mohamed Ali of Egypt on June 24, 1839 and the death of Sultan Mahmoud on July 1, 1839—who was replaced by his 16-year old son Abdul Medjid—the persecutions were stopped and the exiles were recalled.

By 1844 it became clear to keen observers that the policy of coercion had failed, for unwittingly it had paved the way for more open and stronger endeavors by the missionaries and the "reformed" Armenians. Not having learned the lesson of the failure of coercion or perhaps having no notion of an alternative, a second round of persecutions began lightly with the accession to the patriarchal throne of Matteos Choochajian on July 13, 1844 and in serious earnestness in early 1846. The reasons for the intensified obstruction have been listed by the eye-witness Avedis Berberian, Chancellor at the Patriarchate: (1) the missionaries declared that there was no other book than the Gospel; (2) that the Church of

Christ is invisible, there being no visible church; (3) they rejected the mysteries of the church; (4) they refused to accept the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ; (5) and they denied the mediation of the saints; (6) the virginity of the Mother of God until her ascension; (7) the confession of sins to the high priest; (8) the worshiping of the cross; (9) the veneration of the pictures of saints; (10) and fasting and other canons of the Church.<sup>6</sup> The Patriarch used both negative measures and friendly persuasion to win the "reformed" back to the fold. He also authorised debates and public discourses, these being conducted by Deroyentz, a staunch unbending conservative theologian. Those not firmly rooted in faith, turned to their former ways. But, neither the friendly persuasions nor the public debates were able to stay the dynamics of the Movement—in fact, the debates and public discourses brought to life the differences of thought on major matters such as "Faith and Works," the "Nature and Number of the Sacraments," the "Infallibility of the Church"—salvation was seen as through faith as the free grace of God, infallibility was demonstrated to belong to God and not the Church, and the Sacraments were shown to be memorials to Christ and the dying sin. When it was finally observed that the championship of the theology of the Church by Deroyentz was not productive, the debates and the discourses were stopped and other forms of pressures were used.

One of these was the presentation to the "reformed" of a "Paper of Recantation." The readers were to acknowledge they were in error and request forgiveness for having been enticed by Satan to join the "Sectaries." When this did not succeed, fully, the Patriarch wrote a Nine-Article Creed, sometimes termed the "New Creed" of Patriarch Matteos, which outlined the beliefs and practices of the Armenian Church in written form—something never done before. A third document, as an answer to the Protestants, was a 47-page booklet outlining the

responsibility of the Church to its flock, the errorlessness of its theology and an order to return to the fold.

These documents appeared as intimidations to the "awakened" and they reacted strongly. The approach was the wrong prescription. Between January 22 and July 1, 1846, the Armenian Evangelicals responded with three documents. When placed side by side with the "Paper of Recantation," the "New Creed," and the booklet they give conspicuous evidence that the two groups were locked in for a serious battle.<sup>7</sup> The first of these documents was a letter addressed to the Patriarch by the members of the Society of the Pious and was signed "Persecuted Christians." It pleaded for the cessation of the persecutions and argued that they were true Armenians and true Christians standing on the authority of the Bible. The Patriarch replied to this document with an unyielding and uncompromising 47-page statement on the position of the Armenian Church, and about the error of the "sectarians."

The second Evangelical Document was the proclamation addressed to the public by the newly-found Church giving reasons and justifications for the separation. And the third document was a Twelve-Article Confession of Faith of the newly-established Church constituted on July 1, 1846 with forty members (37 male and 3 female). All three were documents formulated within a period of six months.

The founding of the Church was brought about by two excommunication decrees. The first one, read in all the churches, was dated January 25, 1846. It was more limited than the second decree in that the first anathematized a specific priest named Vertanes Yeznakian and warned the faithful not to be fooled by the "Sectaries." But, when after the excision of Vertanes the evangelicals were called up one by one by the Patriarch and required to sign the "Paper of Recantation" and they refused, a second excommunication decree was issued a week later in which all those belonging to the Evangelical point of

view were "accursed," and whoever "went" to visit them "were to be made public to the holy Church by terrible anathemas."

**The cup had overflowed. The separation was effected, when in reality neither side wanted it.** Yet, by the nature of the radical protest it was inevitable that the two views would not be reconcilable. As Joachim Wach has demonstrated in his **Sociology of Religion**, secession is the sociological consequence of radical confrontation. Religions face periodic protests against the main trend of their development in all three fields of religious expression—in theology, in cult, and in organization. The regenerated Armenians turned their criticism, paralleling Wach's analysis, to the suggested three areas: (1) the doctrinal tenets, (2) the ritual or elements in the cult, and (3) the organization of the Armenian Church. Working towards the achievement of a higher spiritual and moral perfection on a personal and national level, by turning to the Gospels of Jesus of Nazareth, they came into head-on collision with a monolythic and hierarchical church which could not possibly bend in case her compromise would be mistaken for weakness. Thus, the radical confrontation of the "awakened" which called for real change led to secession—an event that has happened so often in the history of Christianity and world religions.

### **The Role of the Times**

The latter part of the eighteenth and the early part of nineteenth centuries in Turkey were periods in which reform tendencies were at work. Abdul Hamid I (1774-1789) first and then three succeeding Sultans—Selim III (1789-1807), Mahmoud II (1808-1839), Abdul Mejid (1839-1861)—attempted to turn Turkey western, issued reform decrees, and guaranteed human rights (though left unfulfilled mostly). Mejid's Hatt-i-Sheriff stated:

The imperial concessions shall extend to all subjects of whatever Religion or sect and that

they will be granted perfect security in their lives, their honour, and their fortunes.

Armenians were elated and joyful and their pent-up feelings for freedom found open expression. Their openness and response to the enlightened and independent teachings of the American missionaries was the religious phase of this developing tendency for reform. Curiously, however, the Armenian Church in this same period considered the Armenian Christian who took the Bible as his sole guide to be an apostate and placed the heaviest pressure its civil power could muster. The surprise of the "re-generated" Armenians was great, therefore, that freedom of conscience in religious matters decreed by a Mohammedan Government was not granted by the Armenian Apostolic Church on grounds that national solidarity would be endangered. This strange contradiction, in a period when the air was full of change and reform, did not help win the dissidents back to the Armenian Church—on the contrary, with the excommunication decrees polarizing the two groups, a separate church was finally founded as we have seen. The vested powers had carried their pressure too far.

A revival among Armenians was possible on account of two other considerations. The first consideration is that there had always been a demand and hope for reform within the Apostolic Church. The Paulician-Tonrakian movement of the seventh to the middle of the ninth century for the Paulician portion, and from the middle of the ninth to the middle of the eleventh for the Tonrakian portion was one such demand. The Armenian Church, however, crushed the movement cruelly.<sup>8</sup> In the eighteenth century, too, resistance to the "errors" of the Armenian Church showed itself with the criticism of priest Dibajian whose book was circulated secretly. Kevorb-Mesrob writes of Dibajian:

But long before the coming of the Protestant missionaries to the East, an Armenian priest

in 1760 had raised a voice regarding the reformation of the Armenian Church.

Dibajian had written an extensive criticism of the Church. Thus there were demands for genuine and fundamental reform in the Church but the priesthood used its hierarchial power to obstruct and nullify such trends.

The second consideration is less objective, but equally important. It is rooted in the fact that there was need for a revitalization. As subjects of an important Ottoman government, and ruled as third class citizens for some four hundred years, the talented and capable Armenian citizenry had a seriously damaged image both of Turkey and Turkish culture and self. In an age of enlightenment, for an Armenian Renaissance was also at work, the Armenian citizenry in Constantinople were frustrated and their image of the self and the Armenian Church was unsatisfactory. Under such conditions, sociologically speaking, awakened individuals attempt to change the image in order to find a more satisfactory Gestalt. Given the sufficient amount of freedom as they were, it was inevitable that many Armenians would change the maze—and they did. Having higher goals and ideals presented to them by the West, and specially by America, there was no way of limiting the enlightened dreams of sincere seekers of “new” truth and life based on “new” truth.

There were other factors, of course, which entered into the founding of the Armenian Evangelical Church within the Movement. What has been said, however, is sufficient to demonstrate that we are dealing with a complex problem that was controversial then and, if we are not careful, can be controversial now. Our intention has been that of presenting a sincere, forthright, accurate and objective account of the event with the purpose of being helpful in the “shaping up” of the future. The future cannot be constructed on sound foundations if the failures and successes of the past, as well as its



lessons and dynamics are not evaluated properly and scientifically.

The human spirit, far from being fearful or fragile, is fearless and imperishable. What truth we may today block, due to our limited knowledge or conservatism, will triumph tomorrow even if that tomorrow is a thousand years hence. Therefore, in a spirit of optimism, one hopes and dreams that spiritual leaders today would shed off their traditional or psychological or religious inhibitions and undertake in earnest and courageously the job of revitalizing what is a seriously waning Armenian spirituality. Our own hopes and dreams are that the push and pull, the hopes and dreams, the mistakes and constructive thrusts of human actors which combined to light the candle of evangelical Christianity among Armenians in the Ottoman Empire might be replaced by "a push and pull" at the present time to light the candle of a vibrant Christianity among all Armenians in our time.

G. H. Chopourian

<sup>1</sup> James L. Barton, *Daybreak in Turkey* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1908), p. 157.

<sup>2</sup> American Board, *Annual Report*, (Boston: 1810), p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Eli Smith, *Researches of the Rev. E. Smith and Rev. H.G.O. Dwight in Armenia* (Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1833) Vol. I, pp. 57, 155-230; Vol. II, pp. 44-45, 101-126.

<sup>4</sup> This reaction was foreseen by Patriarch Stepanos, but those, like Patriarchs Hagopos and Matteos who believed they could arrest the Revivalistic Movement by strict measures won their point but lost their cause.

<sup>5</sup> Karekin Sarkissian, *The Council of Chalcedon and the Armenian Church*. (London: S.P.C.K., 1965), pp. 196-218.

<sup>6</sup> Avedis Berberian, *History of Armenians: Beginning with 1772 to 1860*. (Constantinople: Boghos Kirishjian and Co. Press, 1871), p. 296.

<sup>7</sup> For a comparison of the theological implications of the documents, see Giragos H. Chopourian, *The Causes of the Separation of the Armenian Evangelicals from the Armenian Apostolic Church: A Doctor-*

al Dissertation. (Priladelphia: Library of Temple University, 1970), pp. 69-75.

<sup>8</sup> This Movement did not contribute to the nineteenth century Evangelical Reformation. This writer has not seen any valid link between the two, though some authors (see A. A. Goergizian's work on the Paulician Movement) claim there was. Neither can the Armenian Evangelicals look with uncritical favor upon many of the beliefs, theological positions, and the practices of the Paulician Movement as revealed in *The Key of Truth*, the handbook of Paulicians.

<sup>9</sup> Hagop A. Chakmakjian, *Armenian Christology and Evangelization of Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965), pp. 126-127.

<sup>10</sup> Diocese of the Armenian Church of America, *The Armenian Church* (New York: November, 1968), Vol. X, No. 6, pp. 1,3.

<sup>11</sup> The Armenian Reporter (New York: January 15, 1970), p. 7.

# **A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE BENEFITS AND DETRIMENTS OF THE ARMENIAN EVANGELICAL MOVEMENT**

## **The Benefits**

"There are no roses without thorns," goes the saying. The truth of this saying may apply to an idea, event, or program. Whether it is a political, a social, an economic or a general philosophy of life there are two or more views to contend with—some see only the positive, others the negative and the harmful. Even dictatorships like those of Mussolini and Hitler have adherents who find the movements beneficial, while Christianity itself has been viewed by some with having been detrimental.

Undoubtedly, in the matter before us, the same truth applies. The Armenian Evangelical Movement was neither without its benefits nor its detriments. It is not always easy to view both sides of a question in its nakedness, and it is vastly more difficult to live by the truths of opponents. Even those who claim objectivity and impartiality, approach problems with a given amount of bias and prejudice. With a view to being as objective, impartial, and unprejudicial as possible this writing will present, first, the favorable aspects of the Armenian Evangelical Movement and second, its detriments and disadvantages. The favorable aspects should demonstrate that the history of the Armenian Evangelical Movement of the past one hundred and twenty-five years has been of great importance to the Armenian people, having made substantial contributions to the entire nation.

## **The Spirit of Religious Tolerance**

The nineteenth century, despite the oncoming renaissance, was a period in which religious tolerance was absent. Those who diverged from the thinking of the hierarchy, whether of the Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or Armenian Apostolic Church could speak best outside their country of residence. So the great Greek educator and reformist, Koraes, wrote and spoke outside of Greece in France! One of the unacceptable postures of the Armenian Evangelical by the Apostolic leadership was the insistence of the former to think religiously as he wished—desired tolerance on the part of his leaders.

As the Armenian Evangelical Movement progressed, it aided in the elimination of illiteracy through its various educational and religious activities. Gradually, though begrudgingly, the Protestant was accepted into the main stream of Armenian life. The time came, in reality, when bishops of the Apostolic tradition condescended to preach from Armenian Evangelical church pulpits when invited. In fact, the invitations were often reciprocated thus giving the Armenian Protestant leaders an opportunity to preach the Word in the Apostolic Church. Today, the spirit of religious tolerance is an established fact in the United States and to some extent in other parts of the world where Armenians live.

## **The Leavening of the Life of the Nation**

H. A. Chakmakjian, referring to the Armenian Evangelical Movement and its influence writes: "The religious, educational, and social life of the Armenian nation has been leavened by the influence of this spiritual movement."<sup>1</sup> Both Archbishop Hrant Khatchadourian of the Prelacy of the Armenian Church and Archbishop Torkom Manoogian of the Diocese of the Armenian Church, when asked to give their evaluation of the Movement, said, with certain reservations, that Armenian Protestantism brought some blessings to the people and the Church—a

general feeling of love of religion, of a prayerful life, love of Bible-reading, higher education, a keen awareness toward basic needs of the human soul . . . . It appears to us that were the past inhibitions forgotten, a large number of Armenians would go on record to state that the Armenian Evangelical Movement did in fact become a strengthening influence upon the life of the Armenian people and nation.

### **The Creation of an Envable System of Education**

The Evangelicals, with the assistance of the American missionaries, created an enviable system of education from kindergarten to college from which, gradually, large numbers of Armenian Apostolic children benefited.<sup>2</sup> To the criticism by some that this was unacceptable because the American Missionaries were giving the direction, one is forced to reflect upon the present situation in the United States! Close to three hundred thousand Armenians are happy living and learning in America. The quality education Armenians are now receiving was open to all Armenians in the Ottoman Empire.

### **The Stimulation of Competition**

Another healthy influence of the Evangelical Movement was the stimulation it provided to the Apostolic leadership to compete. Puzant Yeghiayan, reflecting upon the reaction of the Apostolic leadership to the founding of primary and secondary schools says that the Armenian Church responded by "creating school for school." A fair evaluation of the educational activities of the Armenian Protestants will demonstrate that the Armenian nation, on the whole, was stimulated to competition in the founding and improving of schools to the extent that some Protestants are beginning to state today that the Armenian Apostolic Schools are getting ahead of the Protestant ones. A situation, if valid, gives nothing but joy and deep satisfaction to the Armenian Protestant.

## **The Translation and Popularization of the Bible**

The Armenian nation had come to love the Scriptures very early in the history of Christianity. In fact, Christian literature had created an Armenian Golden Age during the fifth century. But, in due time the Armenian's love for the Scriptures was dulled having been replaced by form and affirmation of faith. Further, the large proportion of the population had become biblically ignorant. One of the reasons, among many others, was his inability to understand the ancient Armenian (krapar). But, the Armenian Evangelical Movement helped in the translation of the Bible into the vernacular. Equipped with a Bible in the colloquial, the Armenian became conversant with its truths once again in a vibrant way. Once again, "love of Bible-reading," as Archbishop Khatchadourian says, became part and parcel of the individual and the family. The Bible became again a current book, and its reading was popularized, with the resultant good benefits for pious living.

## **The Purification of the Spoken Armenian Language**

K. Orchanian concedes that the translation of the Scriptures into the vernacular Armenian helped purify the spoken Armenian language of the time.<sup>3</sup> The spoken language, put into writing in a book as important as the Bible, developed a uniform Armenian vernacular and helped systematize grammatical constructions.

## **The Introduction of Sunday School Concept**

Another important Evangelical contribution was its influence on the introduction of the Sunday School system into the Apostolic Church. Today, in America, it is a normally accepted practice in the Armenian Apostolic churches. In the past, because of the connection of the Sunday School to the Reformed churches, the Apostolic Church had shied away from introducing the concept for

a long time. One of the salutary benefits to the Armenian Church has been the practice of this program.

### **The Separation of Church and Politics**

At the present time, the two major Sees, the one at Antelias and the other at Etchmiadzin, are in serious dispute. Party politics has been injected into church life and two parties are involved in a broil that has split the Apostolic community into two "warring" factions. In contrast, the Armenian Evangelical Movement has kept politics outside the Church, thus enabling partisans of different political views to work and live together in the Church—thus mediating against divisiveness, a condition which is praised by the Armenian Apostolic.

### **The Keeping of the Apostolic Church Open to Reform**

The Protestants are a kind of a gadfly, pricking the Apostolic leadership and keeping the option of reform open before them. In some respects, the reaction amounts to a counter-reformation. Much has been written about the need for reform in the Apostolic Church by prominent leaders. In the last few years, a call for radical reform was made by youth and adults, laymen and clergy. One such call came from the Armenian Christian Youth Organization of America in a document which came to be called the "Williams Bay Manifesto,"<sup>4</sup> and another from Professor V. L. Parsegian, professor in the field of Atomic Physics at the Rennsalaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York.<sup>5</sup> There is no doubt that many factors, particularly changing patterns in the United States, account for the change of outlook. Yet, the Evangelicals have been a constant reminder of this need by their very existence as a separate entity.

### **The Provision of a Haven for the Radicals**

Evangelicalism provided a haven to those who had imbibed agnostic views during their intellectual training.

Many had imbibed, with the good, the concepts of "infidelity" of France and the agnosticism of Voltaire who had emptied the religious concept of nearly all of its content and made God an unknowable Supreme Being, remote originator of an orderly universe and moral law. The Armenian Evangelical Movement, with its criticism of the worse aspects of the ceremonial and sacerdotal in the Armenian Church, became a haven to a number who had become critical of the worse aspects of the Church. Therefore, as a result of the Evangelical stand, instead of turning totally agnostic, or forming a reform group of more radical nature, a substantial number were able to enter more readily into the religious movement in which "living according to the dictates of Jesus" was acceptable to them. Without this escape valve, it is feared that the Armenian Apostolic Church would have found itself face to face with a more dangerous and radical resistance or it would have lost to agnosticism a great number of its learned men.

Fear was entertained that Armenian Evangelicals would abandon their national identity and also weaken the Armenian nation by the division. Neither of these fears materialized. As a matter of fact there are those who believe that the Armenian Protestant forefathers were dominated by an equally strong nationalistic outlook as the rest of the Armenians—that they developed a longing for national aspirations rather than a longing for the regeneration of Armenians as well as non-Armenians. Chakmakjian, for instance, argues for the need for "denationalization" by Armenian Protestants.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Detriments**

If the hierarchy of the Armenian Apostolic Church in the first half of the nineteenth century had the foresight and a greater wisdom, and or if the reform-minded members of the church had the patience to introduce their proposed reforms gradually and less conspicuously, perhaps the breach would have been avoided. The breach



did take place however, with its great impact on the people. Some of the benefits of the Armenian Evangelical Movement have already been enumerated. Here are a few of the negative aspects:

### **1. Persecution and Suffering**

Even though the breach of the Evangelicals and the Apostolic Church was on theological grounds, the full impact of it on the people was much more inclusive and deep. The Armenians were a small Christian minority in a Moslem and hostile environment. Moreover, the small group of Armenians, as Evangelicals, were excommunicated, separated and socially ostracized by the main body of Christian Armenians. They suffered ridicule, insults, financial and business boycotts. In the earliest stages of the separation they were deprived of the services of the clergy for purposes of baptism, marriage, burial, communion, etc. There have been many cases of severe persecution and heartache.

### **2. Alienation of relatives and compatriots**

The persecution showed its influence upon members of families. When one adhered to the Evangelical Movement he was despised, disinherited, and even looked upon as a second or third rate Armenian. Some extreme fanatics did not even consider the Evangelicals as Armenians. "I'll become a Turk before I become a 'porod'" (a leper, insulting reference to Protestants), was a well-known expression. There was great grief, suffering and humiliation endured by Protestants, and embarrassment by loyal Apostolic Armenians whose relatives had turned Protestant. Fortunately the degree of the persecutions subsided during the ensuing decades, but the feeling of alienation never fully disappeared.

### **3. All this weakened the solidarity of the Armenian people**

We have always been a small nation numerically. This breach weakened us further. When there were great

tasks to be performed our forces were divided. It was in more recent decades, specifically during World War I and the Turkish atrocities that Armenians woke up to the realization that so far as the Turk was concerned we were all Armenians, to be tortured and killed. So in desperation, in self-defense, Armenians of all convictions, religious and political, rallied together in various cities in heroic efforts for self-preservation. This fact perhaps brought us to the realization that with a common enemy we had to unite and cooperate.

Most of us Armenians are now living in politically free countries. But the need for unity among us is still a great necessity.

Separate Apostolic and Evangelical churches and schools struggle in small towns and villages where only one church or school would better serve the area, and with more economy.

#### **4. Established Armenian Evangelicalism—a hindrance to the reformation of the Armenian Apostolic Church**

This heading will look strange to most Evangelicals. But I believe there is truth in it. Dr. M. S. Kaprielian in his book, **Armenian Protestantism—Its Past and Future**, referred to this in the year 1888. Because the Evangelicals wanted to see some reform take place in the Armenian Church and were refused, the separation was the result. Whenever, thereafter, there was any inclination for reform within the church, there was a reluctance, delay or outright refusal because of fear that it might mean an admission that the Evangelicals were right. Any tendency towards reform was subject to suspicion as Protestant. So it created a complex situation. On the one hand Evangelicalism stimulated competition, as stated before, yet on the other hand it delayed reform because of self-consciousness on the part of the Apostolic Church as following in the footsteps of Protestants.

G. H. Chopourian and S. K. Sulahian

<sup>1</sup> Hagop A. Chakmakjian, *Armenian Christology and the Evangelization of Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965), p.125.

<sup>2</sup> The system was wrecked in 1915 with the commencement of the massacres, but by 1920 it was re-established in Lebanon and Syria where the bulk of the Armenian 'remnants' settled. By the founding of the Haigazian College in Beirut in 1955, the only degree-giving institution among Armenians outside Soviet Armenia, the higher education end of the system was added. Interestingly, this college has to date given two Bachelor of Art degrees to two Armenian celibate priests of the Apostolic Church. Attendance in Evangelical Schools up to high school is about 79% Apostolic and 21% Protestant and other.

<sup>3</sup> K. Orchanian, *History of the Armenian Language and Linguistics* (Marsovan: Nerso and Srabian, 1913), pp.114-115.

<sup>4</sup> Diocese of the Armenian Church of America, *The Armenian Church* (New York: November, 1968) Vol. X, No. 6, pp.1,3.

<sup>5</sup> The Armenian Reporter, (New York: January 15, 1970), p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Hagop A. Chakmakjian, *op. cit.*, pp. 126-127.

## **AN OPTIMISTIC LOOK INTO THE FUTURE**

For some one hundred and twenty-five years the breach between the Armenian Evangelical Church and the Armenian Apostolic Church has been accepted as an accomplished and unchangeable fact. The birth of the Armenian Evangelical Church has been considered alternately as either a curse or a blessing within the life of the Armenian nation, depending upon which side of the fence one happens to be.

Generally admitting that the breach, the separation as such, was an unfortunate event, the people on both sides of the breach have indulged in the sport of blaming the other side, attributing the blame, the total blame, on the opponent. This has resulted during all these years in untold miseries, prejudices and ill feelings held mutually by both parties within the one and only small nation.

The worst aspect of all this is, I think, the unfortunate assumption that both parties held the accomplished fact of the separation as final and irremediable. So each went his merry old way blaming the other and justifying himself in every possible way.

The written records concerning the Protestant movement among the Armenians, as written by adherents of the Apostolic Church, lay all the responsibility of the breach upon the very same persons whom the adherents of the Protestant Church credit with the wisdom and virtue of having done a wonderful thing.

I am sure there are a few Armenian Evangelicals, like myself, who are now ready to admit that the full truth does not lie in one or the other point of view. The truth of the matter is, no doubt, in a combination of virtues and faults in each group. It seems to me that the Apostolic Church was too hasty in its decision on the Armenian Evangelicals in the act of excommunication and ane-

thema. On the other hand the Evangelicals were also too zealous and impatient with the Mother Church in expecting that changes and reforms be accomplished in the church overnight. Had there been more understanding, patience, wisdom, diplomacy, and above all, genuine love, between both parties concerned the breach could have been avoided.

Now that 125 years have passed since the official founding of the Armenian Evangelical Church, the situation is considerably changed. Through the years the spectrum of feelings among members of the Apostolic and Evangelical churches has moved from formal animosity and hatred to tempered dislike, to indifference, to reserved acceptance of each other, to superficial cordiality, to nominal cooperation in the general life of our people.

There are some of us on both sides fortunately, who are not satisfied with the mere appearance of peace and cordiality but are anxious to achieve real cooperation, understanding, mutual respect and genuine love. We do not believe in healing our wounds from the outside. We want the infection cleared, we want full and speedy recovery.

To my knowledge, and I admit my knowledge on the subject is very far from being exhaustive and complete, there has not been sufficient endeavor on either side to start a dialogue between the two parties in an effort to heal the wounds and to bridge the gap, until very recently.

One definite desire to remedy the breach has been expressed in a booklet in Armenian by Dr. M. S. Kaprielian, entitled **Armenian Protestantism—Its Past and Future**, published in Constantinople in 1888, some 42 years after the founding of the Armenian Evangelical Church. Obviously, however, it had no effect on the existing separation of the two churches.

It was on February 17, 1966, in the City of New York, during a joint celebration of Vartanantz, that this writer made a public and open request that the Catholicos of All

Armenians consider seriously the rescinding of the Act of 1846 as issued by Patriarch Matteos Choochajian and thereby tear the wall of adverse sentiment between the Apostolic Church and the Evangelicals, opening the door to cordial and affectionate relationship between both churches.

Part of the text of the above mentioned address was published in the **Armenian American Outlook**, Vol. IV, No. 1. Among other points it was stated that the Vartanantz battle was fought in defense of freedom of religion and conscience. This freedom was more precious for them than life itself. This has been true for many of us through the years and is so now. We respect the right of others for the freedom of their thoughts and we expect others to do the same for us. This freedom-loving nation has a black spot in its record. Having struggled all through its history for its freedom, it has denied the very same freedom of thought and conscience to a group of its own people known as the Evangelicals, and has anathemized them in 1846 and imposed on them insults and persecutions for many years. Armenian papers responded immediately, some favorably and some critically. The Executive Committee of the Armenian Evangelical Union of America, Eastern States and Canada, decided in its meeting on November 2, 1968 to adopt and support the project. The Executive Committee of the Armenian Evangelical Union of California followed suit on May 3, 1969.

Consequently a committee was appointed by both Evangelical Unions under the name of **Commission on Ecumenicity** of the Armenian Evangelical Union of North America.

This is what has happened since. On the occasion of the visit of His Holiness Vasken I to the United States in 1968, a courtesy visit was made to him by the representatives of the Armenian Evangelical Union of America, Eastern States and Canada, on May 7 in New York, and another similar visit by the Executive Committee of the Armenian Evangelical Union of California, in Los Angeles,

on May 18. During the latter visit a well prepared statement, in search of better relationship between the two churches, was presented to His Holiness for His kind consideration.

A formal letter of appeal was addressed to the Catholicos of All Armenians, dated May 15, 1969, on behalf of the Armenian Evangelical Union of North America, signed by the Commission on Ecumenicity. The contents of this letter were considered during the sessions of the Bishops' Conference in Etchmiadzin which took place September 27 through October 2, 1969, and a favorable disposition was officially registered in their minutes, expressing "the desire to encourage at the present time every undertaking between the Armenian Church and the Evangelical communities towards love and unity".

At about the same time as the Bishops' Conference, two Armenian Evangelical Ministers were invited by His Holiness to be His personal guests in Etchmiadzin to represent the Armenian Evangelical Churches of North America during the blessing of muron, and, though not openly stated, also for the celebration of the 60th birthday of His Holiness. The Rev. N. Melidonian and the writer were the privileged ones to be in Etchmiadzin and to enjoy the warm and affectionate hospitality of His Holiness. This was indeed an important milestone in our relationships. A few years ago the Rev. Hovhannes P. Aharonian, Moderator of the Armenian Evangelical Churches of the Middle East, was similarly invited by the Catholicos on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the coronation of His Holiness as Catholicos.

Since our visit to Etchmiadzin we have been receiving Christmas and Easter greetings from His Holiness addressed to all of our Armenian Evangelical Churches, and many of you have read it in your church bulletins. We have reciprocated these greetings. Favorable remarks have been heard from many of you in response to these letters. We are very pleased with this.

A major step towards better understanding has been taken by the appointment of ecumenical committees representing both churches to meet for dialogue. By the suggestion of His Holiness a committee was formed under the chairmanship of His Grace Archbishop Tiran Nersoyan within the Prelacy of His Grace Archbishop Torkom Manoogian. By the decision of the Executive Committees of our two Armenian Evangelical Unions our own Commission on Ecumenicity was authorized to represent the Armenian Evangelicals. The two ecumenical committees have been meeting regularly since October 12, 1970. So far we have had 7 monthly meetings, each one lasting a few hours, and we have discussed our problems in a most cordial manner. In one of my messages I called this relationship "Courtship in Ecumenicity" and I still believe that is a valid description of our relationship.

We have mutually agreed upon a number of important points which will soon be presented to the Primate and the Catholicos on the one side and to the Executive Committee of our newly merged Union on the other. Upon the acceptance and ratification of these points by the authorities of the Apostolic and Evangelical Churches, we shall then publicize these points through papers for the information of all. We have mutually agreed not to publicize these points until the above mentioned steps have been taken.

I feel perfectly free to say this much, however. Our dialogue with the representatives of the Mother Church has been truly amicable. We have come to see a little more of each other's point of view, and indicated willingness to make all possible effort to heal past wounds, initiate new and practical opportunities for closer cooperation, and to treat one another with mutual respect and Christian love. Nothing more as a start could be expected of any person or group.

So as we celebrate the 125th anniversary of the Armenian Evangelical Movement we are not resorting to boastfulness for our churches and belittling of the Apos-



tolic Church. The achievements and the contributions as well as shortcomings of the Armenian Evangelical movement are part of history. The heroic struggle of the Mother Church in its gigantic effort for the preservation of religion and ethnic heritage, and also its need of reformation in several areas are also common knowledge. We are not here today to build one up and tear down the other.

Rather, we are at that point in history where it behooves us, Apostolic or Evangelical, to apply our honest thoughts to a real self-examination, self-evaluation, and before trying to cast out the mote from our brother's eye to see if there may be a beam in our own eye.

May this 125th anniversary of the Armenian Evangelical Movement also be the serious beginning in the history of our nation, of an honest effort to bridge the gap and proceed in the spirit of modern day ecumenicity.

It is common knowledge for any one who follows the news that we are in an ecumenicity-minded period of church history. Cooperation between the Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants and Jews, which was unheard of some decades ago, is a frequent occurrence in our day. All parties concerned seem to be enjoying the experience and deriving sufficient benefit to make the effort worthwhile. We are happy that the Armenian Apostolic Church also caught the spirit of the day and in 1958 joined the World Council of Churches, thus cooperating with other Orthodox and Protestant churches. This is a healthy reality.

At a time in the history of the Christian Church when mergers, unions and ecumenical rapprochements are the order of the day, may we Armenians, members of the Apostolic and Evangelical Churches, not be weighed in the balances and found wanting.

We can only see positive and advantageous results from a collective, progressively unified endeavor between all religious components of our nation. We are facing such gigantic problems as Armenian people today that nothing less than the total application of all our minds, hearts,

strength and resources can solve them. In Armenia proper we have lost most of our Christian faith and practice. In the diaspora we are submitted to the white massacre. Each succeeding generation is less Armenian in national and ethnic identity than the one before. It is obvious that there is a serious task before us all. The sacred task of educating, inspiring and strengthening our people to be faithful to their Christian faith, national heritage and ethnic virtues and values. We must all work together as one body, or at least as supplementary forces, always encouraging the other, building upon the efforts of one another, and never weakening the endeavors of others for reasons of jealousy, partisanship or ill will.

May future historians be able to say that the 125th anniversary of the separation of Armenian Apostolic and Evangelical Churches also proved to be the beginning of the realization of the Master's prayer that they all may be one.

Let us restate our organic relationship to the Mother Church. Let us re-express our love to her. Let us offer our affection and support to her. Let us help her in her worthy causes and endeavors. Let us also welcome her love to us and her fellowship and cooperation with us. With joint effort and mutual love each one of our churches will be a greater and more vital church and our collective service in God's kingdom will be more fruitful indeed.

May God open our eyes, inspire us, and give us all the wisdom to walk to newer victories under the banner of our common Lord and Master Jesus Christ.

S. K. Sulahian

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